

FORESEEABLE

PAUL LEVINSON

They sometimes call bathrooms washrooms, right? Anyway, I went into the bathroom – the men’s room – in Saggio’s just to wash my hands and face. It was a hot July day in the city, I’d walked from the train at 181st Street, and I wanted to be as fresh as possible for Jenny. We’d known each other for a while, ever since the Psych Class we’d taken at NYU almost a year ago, but this was just our second date, and I very much wanted everything to go right.

I got back to our table. I’d arrived at the restaurant about ten minutes early – unusual for me – and kept my eye on the door for Jenny. I realized I couldn’t see that clearly--Of course not, stupid me, I’d left my glasses in the washroom. I got up and rushed back in.

Ah, there they were! Right on the nice marbled sink, where I’d left them. I had a pair of black horn-rimmed glasses – what can I tell you – and they were right there. I picked them up and knew that they weren’t mine a split second later. A little heavier, the black was a subtler shade, I don’t know. But they weren’t mine.

I dashed out of the washroom and looked around the restaurant. It wasn’t that big. Most of the tables were filled. A few guys had on glasses, but none were even remotely like mine. Several were wire rimmed. One was like Buddy Holly’s, black, but otherwise not like mine. What was going on?

I sat down at my table, and I know this was another dumb thing to do, but I put on the pair of glasses I’d found in the men’s room. And they worked for me, perfectly! Of course they did – the guy who had mistakenly taken mine must have thought they were his, because our prescriptions were the same. My vision’s not that bad – I’m just a little near-sighted – and there must be a huge number of glasses with my prescription out there.

I looked at the door. Everything was crystal clear. Including Jenny, who walked in, looking great in a soft blue tank top and washed-out jeans. I stood, smiling, and waved her over to my table.

“You’ve got new glasses,” she said, and gave me a big smile back.

“Yeah,” I said. I thought at lightning speed. No, I wasn’t going to tell how I had gotten these glasses, at least, not now. Maybe after we’d gotten to know each other better.

The waiter came over with menus. I took my glasses off and put them in my shirt pocket. They got in the way of my reading, and I didn't like wearing them when I was eating, either.

Dinner was delicious. So was the conversation. Jenny excused herself to go to the lady's room, and I signaled the waiter for the check. I got it quickly and paid with my phone. I had just put my glasses back on when Jenny returned.

"You ok?" she asked. "You look like you've just seen a ghost." She laughed, a little.

"Fine," I assured her and stood. "I was just ... thinking about something."

"Ok," she said. "You can tell me about it on the way home. Should we take the train?" She had a nice little apartment in the village – her parents paid for it, their way of keeping her in New York – and her saying I should accompany her on the trip back home probably meant I had a pretty good chance of being invited up there.

"Sure," I said. "But why don't we walk a little first. You in the mood for that?"

She nodded. "It's cooled off a little. What could be better than a walk near the Hudson River in the summer?"

We walked along the bike path, and it was indeed beautiful. But now I'd lied to Jenny about two things. One, a lie of omission about how I'd obtained these new glasses. Two, that I was thinking about something when she came back from the lady's room.

The truth was, I hadn't been thinking about something. I'd been *seeing* something. The southbound A train stalled just out of the station, the one near our restaurant. I hadn't imagined that or envisioned it or anything like that. It wasn't a day dream. I had actually seen it – and Jenny and me stuck, irritated, frustrated on that stalled train.

I went in to speak to Jim the next day. He was a PhD student in psychology – a grad assistant in our program – and seemed the best person I

knew to talk about hallucinations, even though I was still sure I had not been hallucinating.

I told him about what had happened to me the night before. I told him everything, including about my new glasses – who knows, maybe they were putting some strain on my brain. I also told him that I'd checked online and there had indeed been some huge delay in the subway near Washington Heights, which is just where Jenny and I had been the night before. Ok, I didn't tell him one thing, that I'd spent the night at Jenny's and it had been great, after we'd walked about twenty blocks and caught an IRT train which was running fine and stopped right across the street from her apartment. But that had happened after my vision of the stalled train and was none of his business besides.

"So your vision about the train proved to be true," Jim said. "That's why you're so concerned about this."

"Exactly."

"Well, there is such a thing as coincidence, but I agree that what you saw was very specific," he said.

"Right."

"What were you doing right before you saw this?"

"I was waiting for Jenny to come back from the lady's room and was idly looking at the front of the restaurant," I replied.

"And you put back on your newly acquired glasses?"

"Yes," I said.

"And the first time you ever had an experience like this was last night, after you got the glasses? Seeing something slightly in the future."

"Yes," I said. "I'm certain I never had an experience like that before."

"Well, then, the glasses are definitely the significant variable – the factor that either made you lose your mind, but with pinpoint accuracy, or gave you a glimpse of your future," Jim said.

"That's what I was thinking," I said. "But which one? Crazy or seeing the future?"

"That's the question," Jim said. "And it may not matter, since, crazy or not, you apparently actually did see the future. Which would be a huge

coincidence if you also were crazy." Jim stroked his beard. "Do you have the new glasses with you?"

I reached into my shirt pocket and pulled out the glasses. "I do."

"Mind if I see them?" Jim asked.

I thought for a hard second. "Sure." I handed Jim the glasses. I'd nearly said, "be careful with them," but figured that might be insulting.

Jim did handle the glasses very carefully. He held them up to the light that was coming through the window, slowly opened and closed the arms, set the glasses on the table with the arms folded and scrutinized them. "Is it ok with you if I try them on?"

"I ... sure, I guess so," I replied. "You want to see if they have that same effect on you? I've had them on several times this morning, and saw nothing strange."

Jim nodded and carefully donned the glasses. "I have close to perfect vision," he said. He took the glasses off and shook his head. "All I saw was a blur." He gave the glasses back to me.

"So what's our next step?" I asked.

He laughed. "Well, you do have me intrigued. The next step would be to take account of all the variables that could have been at play at the time of your vision."

"We go back to Saggio's?" I asked.

"Yep, and the same time of day would be good. And with your girlfriend there, too."

"How do we account for the same patrons who were there last night?" I asked.

Jim shook his head. "We can't account for everything."

I realized I had to be honest with Jenny, and own up completely to the lies I had told her the night before. She had asked something about the glasses again, after we'd made love last night, and I'd given her some kind of vague answer that I couldn't quite remember. We were both pretty hammered and

more than half asleep by then. But, yeah, one-hundred percent disclosure was called for now. There was no other way I could reasonably ask her to come back to the very same restaurant we had dined in last night, and have Jim join us no less, without telling her exactly how I'd really gotten hold of these glasses, and, even more importantly, what I had seen through them.

I sat down on a bench in Washington Square Park to think things out. But I didn't get much thinking done. There was a band on the far side of the park doing acoustic covers of some of my favorite Beatles songs with spot-on, perfect harmonies. There was always a comfort in hearing Beatles harmony, and I sure needed some of that now. I sang along, under my breath, and put on my glasses so I could get a better look at the group.

That was my mistake. Within seconds after I had put on my glasses, I saw not the group, but Jenny and me, in her apartment. Neither of us was happy. She was telling me that trust was the most important thing to her, and how could she trust me, seeing as how I had lied to her so blatantly last night. "Why didn't you tell me the truth?"

"I thought you'd think I was a weirdo," I said.

She frowned. "How do I know you're telling me the truth right now?"

I took my glasses off and slowly exhaled. So now these glasses had gotten me into an even worse bind. They had shown me that maybe it wasn't a good idea to confide in Jenny, even though I just had decided that it was. Telling her what was going on still seemed the best way of getting her to come back with me to the restaurant. But the glasses had shown me that this was a path that led to further aggravation, before we ever got back to the restaurant.

Well, maybe I'd at least learned one welcome thing from this second vision. This made two out of two visions in which Jenny and I were the subjects. Was she somehow connected to my seeing slightly into the future?

I messaged Jim and told him what had happened. He told me he could meet me on the park bench in 45 minutes. I waked slowly to Sixth Avenue and got a latte.

Jim was on the bench when I returned, with someone else who looked a little older than he was, a redhead. She stood along with Jim and gave me a

bright smile. "This is Peg," Jim introduced her. "A friend of mine from Columbia. She has a dual appointment in Physics and Philosophy. Is it ok if she joins us?"

"Yes," I said, and shook her extended hand. "I appreciate the additional help."

"I've been working like a demon on a biography of Morgenbesser," Peg said. "I appreciate the break."

"I don't think I know his work," I said.

"He was a philosopher at Columbia," Jim said, "from, what, the 1960s through the 90s?"

"Close enough," Peg replied.

"Sorry I didn't ask if you wanted any coffee or tea," I said. I was just about finished with mine.

"We're fine," Jim said, and gestured me to sit. "So, to the matter at hand ..."

I sat and nodded.

"We were thinking it would be very helpful if you could see if your second vision is true," Jim said, "like you did with the first one."

"But, unfortunately, there's no independent source of action, like the trains in your first vision," Peg said. "If you go to see your friend, now—"

"Jenny," I supplied.

"Right, Jenny, thanks," Peg said. "But if you go see Jenny now, and tell her about how you got your glasses, and your two future visions, one of them, the first one, with the two of you essentially bystanders, the second, with the two of you as the only players having a tense moment, well—"

"There'd be no way of knowing if the tense moment was somehow brought on by what you saw in your vision, and you therefore were more anxious to begin with, because of that," Jim said. "Circular, impossible to separate cause and effect. That kind of anxiety can be contagious, self-escalating."

"And if it went the other way, that you were more careful with how you broke this news to her," Peg continued, "and as a result the two of had no discord, just a good talk, then that wouldn't prove anything, either. Maybe your knowledge from your vision diffused the situation, and that's why the

talk went well, or maybe your vision was not a true vision of the future after all."

I sighed. "So, either way, we would have no way of knowing if my vision through the glasses of Jenny and me in the slight future was accurate," I said. "I get it. So, what do we do?"

"I think we've eliminated Saggio's as a significant variable," Jim said. "Your second vision didn't take place in that restaurant."

"That's true if the second vision was true," I said. "You two just convinced me that there's no way we can know that."

Peg smiled. "You're right, he's sharp," she said to Jim about me. To me she said: "And you're right, too. We can't know with any certainty if your second vision was an accurate glimpse of the future, but I'm willing to assume it's true, for now, and see where that takes us."

"Ok," I said. "So again, what's our next move?"

"Might I see the glasses?" Peg asked.

She examined them much the way that Jim had done, but didn't ask to put them on, and she handed them back to me. "Light goes through glass, obviously," she said, "and now I'm putting on my physicist hat."

"Ok," I said and put the glasses back in my shirt pocket.

"It can bend light – refract light is the technical term – it can refract light, it can also reflect light, it can do all sorts of things with light," Peg said.

"The question is whether it can show someone light, or something light is shining on, from the future," Jim said.

"I believe it can," I said. "But why only me? It did nothing for Jim when he tried them on at our earlier meeting in his office."

"Light is very much a part of quantum mechanics," Peg said, "and quantum mechanics is about the power of individual minds to influence physical states."

"So you're saying that my visions of the future through these glasses might be a combination of some kind of light-bending that these glasses do,

when *my* eyes are looking through them, because my eyes are connected to my brain which is in some kind of synch with this light-bending on a quantum level? Wow!"

"Wow indeed," Peg said.

"How could we test that hypothesis?" I asked.

"Well, neither Peg nor I spotted anything unusual in the glass when we eyeballed it," Jim said, "but it could be examined with all kinds of higher power electron transition microscopes that should tell us more."

"I'd have to give over these glasses to a laboratory?" I asked, though the answer was obvious.

Jim and Peg both nodded.

"I'm not sure I'd want to do that," I said,

"We thought you'd feel that way," Jim said.

"At least not until I learn more about this, and what role Jenny is playing, likely unaware that she's playing it," I said. Then added, "although for all I know she is aware."

"Agreed," Peg said. "So let's get back to what we can do so you can learn more about the glasses and Jenny's role in what you've been seeing."

"Ok," I said. "You know that there's another possibility that we didn't mention. Let's say I just don't go over to see Jenny at all today? That would be one way of eliminating the dispute I saw."

"We've already established that if you see something in the near future, and change your current behavior based on that vision, what you saw won't happen," Peg replied. "That what's happened with the vision of Jenny and you stuck on the train last night. Because of that vision, you got Jenny to walk twenty blocks with you and avoided that train. That would be the same effect if, as a result of your vision of you and Jenny today, you didn't go over to see her."

"I see what you're saying," I said.

"And I have yet another idea, another permutation on this visit today," Jim said. "How about all three of us pay Jenny a visit? That would enable you to tell her about your lies of omission and commission last night, and Peg and I could observe the reaction and how it played out."

"Always good to have extra observers in a strange situation like this," Peg said.

"So now Jenny's a guinea pig?"

"You had to know that could happen when you came to talk to me about this in the first place," Jim said.

The three of us walked over to Jenny's apartment. It was maybe a 10-minute walk from where we were, on the other side of Sixth Avenue. I'd called her on the phone, told her I had a psychologist and a philosopher-physicist friend I wanted her to meet, and she said sure, anything beat this paper she was trying to write. Once again, I told her nothing about the glasses. I guess this made the third lie I'd foisted on her about the glasses, another lie of omission. I was getting tired of counting.

The bigger regret, though, I had about going to see Jenny this way was I knew that, if she thought it was just me coming to visit, just me and not three's a crowd, who knows what she might be wearing, maybe next to nothing, which is what she'd had on when I'd kissed her goodbye this morning. But I guess these light-bending glasses took precedence over the normal pleasures of life.

We reached the corner across the street from Jenny's apartment building.

"Why don't you put on the glasses and see if you see anything," Peg said. "But don't tell us what, if you do."

"Good idea, another kind of check on what's going on," Jim said. "We'll find out what happens if you get a glimpse of the future, but don't tell us."

"I did that with Jenny last night," I said.

"Right, but we're not Jenny," Jim said.

"Ok." The light turned to green, I put on the glasses, and started walking across the street.

"Whoa," Jim said, and put a retraining arm on me. "Better wait with the glasses until we're on the other side, not in the middle of an intersection."

I pulled off the glasses.

We crossed the street and stopped near a Japanese restaurant. "You can put them on now," Peg said.

I did as requested – and flinched. I removed the glasses.

"Don't tell us," Peg said. I could tell she and Jim had been watching me closely.

"Can we go see Jenny now?" I asked.

Peg and Jim nodded.

Jenny was wearing more than when I'd seen her this morning but she still looked great. She greeted with me a hug at the open door. I introduced Jim and Peg.

"Come in," Jenny said. We did. "This is my friend, Krystal." A woman, Jenny's age or maybe a little older, I guess, was sitting on the sofa. She rose and walked over to meet us. She had black curly hair and wore glasses with blue frames.

"I hope it's ok that I asked her to join us," Jenny said.

"Of course," Peg and Jim said.

"I work in the boutique on Sullivan Street," Krystal said. "We sell designer glasses."

"Aha! Could be useful," Peg said. She turned to me. "But I thought you said you hadn't told—"

"I'm confused," I said.

Jim touched his beard in thought. "So everyone here knows about Sven's strange glasses – how he found them, what happens sometimes when he puts them on."

"I'm not sure how—" I began.

"You told me last night," Jenny said to me, with just a touch of a mischievous smile. "Just before we fell asleep. I mean, we did have a lot to drink. Don't tell me you don't remember any of that?"

"I remember some of that," I said, embarrassed, not because of what I remembered but because of what I didn't.

"Please, sit down," Jenny said to all of us, and gestured to the sofa and some plush chairs in front of it.

We complied.

"May I ask what it is that Sven told you last night?" Peg asked Jenny. "If it's not too personal?"

"That he left his glasses in the men's room, in Saggio's, and when he realized that, and went back to the men's room, he found the new ones," Jenny replied.

"Ok, anything else?" Peg asked.

"And then later, when I went to the lady's room, he put the glasses on, and saw that the train we were going to take was stalled," Jenny said.

"You didn't find any of that creepy or crazy?" Jim asked.

"Maybe, a little," Jenny said. "I mean, it's a little icky picking up and putting on and then keeping someone else's glasses, a complete stranger's." Jenny laughed, nervously. "But, I don't know, when Sven told me, I thought maybe he was joking." She looked at me, reassuringly. "He has a good sense of humor."

I smiled at her.

"Could I see the glasses," Krystal asked.

"Sure," I said and gave her the glasses.

Krystal carefully examined them, but didn't put them on. "I don't see anything unusual about them," she said.

"That's what everyone says, other than Sven," Jim said.

"Uhm, there is one other thing," Jenny spoke up.

"Yes?" Peg said.

Krystal gave the glasses back to me and I put them in my pocket.

"I, uhm, put the glasses on this morning, when you were sleeping," she said to everyone and to me. "I would've asked you if that was ok, but you were sleeping like a baby, and I didn't want to wake you."

"That's ok," I reached over and squeezed her hand.

"And, you saw something?" Jim asked, gently, correctly guessing where Jenny was going.

"Yeah."

Everyone looked at Jenny. Her jaw was working but she didn't speak.

"That's major news," Jim finally said. "It proves what Sven's been reporting hasn't all been in his head."

Jenny nodded. "I know."

"What'd' you see?" Peg asked, not as gently as Jim.

"I saw this," Jenny replied.

"Could you be more specific?" Jim asked.

"All of us, in this room, having this exact same conversation," Jenny said. "I invited you," she said to Krystal, "because I saw you here, sitting in that exact same place, wearing what you're wearing."

"Did you catch the words in the conversation?" Peg asked.

"Yes."

"What were they?" Peg asked.

"Just what you're now saying," Jenny said. "Just what I'm saying right now – I'm losing my mind!"

I took her hand again.

Krystal stood. "I'm out of here," she said and walked to the door. "This is way above my pay grade and I have to get back to work, anyway."

No one tried to stop her as she left.

I looked at Jim and Peg. "Is that ok? That she heard all of this?"

"No one would believe her if she told them – too preposterous," Peg said.

"I barely believe it myself," Jim said.

"Has the conversation you saw ended?" Peg asked Jenny, "or did you see us still talking?"

"It ended when Krystal left," Jenny replied, slightly relieved.

"Why didn't you tell me about this, when I woke up, this morning?" I asked her.

"Because you clearly didn't know about this conversation in my vision," Jenny said. "Just like you didn't know about it a minute ago."

Peg and Jim looked like they were struggling to make sense of this. I was someplace between struggling and numb.

"Ok," Peg finally said. "So what we have here with Jenny's experience is someone *not* using the vision of the future to avoid that future – like Sven did with the train – but doing what she could to make sure her vision of the future actually came to be."

"Yeah," I said, and realized Jenny was shaking. I got next to her and put my arms around her. She started crying. "It's just too much ..." she managed to say.

I saw that Peg and Jim were both standing. "Listen, I think we've had enough for today," Jim said, looking at both of us in an older brotherly way. "I spotted a vest-pocket park about a half a block further down this street. Why don't Peg and I grab a coffee, and you can meet us there whenever you're ready."

I wasn't sure if the 'you' meant Jenny and me or just me, but I nodded, gratefully.

"Alright, good," Jim said. "We've made a lot of progress." He and Peg left.

Jenny's quivering had stopped and she had mostly finished crying. "I'm sorry," she said, and pulled a little away.

"It's my fault, I got you into this insanity," I said.

"Trust is the most important thing to me in a relationship," she said in a mostly clear voice. "And I lied to you. I should've told you first thing in the morning that I put on your glasses, and what I saw. And I had a chance to tell you when you called, and I didn't tell you then, either. And you lied to me, too, when it all started with that stupid train last night. Why didn't you tell me the truth?"

"I thought you'd think I was a weirdo," I said, just a split second before I realized this was the conversation I had seen when I'd put on the glasses in Washington Square Park just an hour ago. It seemed like a lifetime.

She frowned. "How do I know you're telling me the truth right now?" she asked, hoarsely.

I didn't have the power to reply.

She caught the expression on my face. "Oh my God. Don't tell me you saw this very conversation we're now having, through the glasses, earlier? You should throw those damned glasses away!"

"Peg and Jim wouldn't like that."

Jenny shook her head slowly.

"I think I have just three basic options here," I said, "give them the glasses, throw them away, or keep them."

"I'd get rid of them," Jenny said.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe I should put them on one more time, and see if what I see can give me any guidance."

Jenny leaned over, kissed me on the lips, and put her arms around me. "Let's see if this gives you any guidance," she said and unbuttoned my shirt.

I wasn't really surprised to find Jim and Peg on that little park bench, right where they'd said they'd be, over an hour later. Both were sipping coffees.

"We would've gotten one for you, but it would've gotten cold already," Peg said.

"And I never asked what you were drinking in that venti," Jim added.

"It's ok, I'm fine," I said. I was the most relaxed I'd been all day.

"But it is getting late," Peg said, "and I have an appointment up at Columbia."

"We can get together again tomorrow, or later in the week, no problem," I said.

"Look, I know we asked you before if we could borrow your glasses for hi-tech examination, and you were reluctant," Peg said.

"We could get them back to you in a week, for sure," Jim said and looked at Peg.

She nodded.

"They've caused you and Jenny enough grief," Jim said. "Though it looks like you worked things out." He smiled.

"I'm going to keep them," I said, plainly.

They both almost jumped off the bench at that.

"There's a universe of scientific tests that have to be done on that glass – there's no other way to understand exactly how it bends light, so you can see what's around the bend in time," Peg said.

"You can't guarantee that such high-tech examination won't destroy the glass, and make whatever it is that bends the light inoperable, can you, though?" I asked.

"No, of course not," Peg said. "But the work will be done with the utmost of care, I can promise you."

"I'll think about it," I said. "But I want to test-drive these a little longer on my own."

They each took a step closer. Some might have called that step menacing.

But I wasn't too worried. I'd seen just a few minutes ago how this ended when I put on the glasses before I left Jenny's apartment. Just as I had seen what had made me flinch when we were on our way to Jenny.

And I now had some confidence in what I was seeing. And how I could get on top of it, and use it for my benefit and maybe even the world's benefit.

"We'll be in touch," I said and started to walk away. "I know you can't be sure of that. But I think I can."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Levinson, PhD, is Professor of Communication & Media Studies at Fordham University in NYC. His science fiction novels include *The Silk Code* (winner of the Locus Award for Best First Science Fiction Novel of 1999), *The Consciousness Plague*, *The Pixel Eye*, *Borrowed Tides*, *The Plot to Save Socrates*, *Unburning Alexandria*, and *Chronica*. His award-nominated novelette, “The Chronology Protection Case,” was made into a short film and is on Amazon Prime Video. His nonfiction books, including *The Soft Edge*, *Digital McLuhan*, *Realspace*, *Cellphone*, *McLuhan in an Age of Social Media*, and *Fake News in Real Context* have been translated into 15 languages. He appears on CBS News, CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, the Discovery Channel, National Geographic, the History Channel, and NPR. His 1972 album, *Twice Upon A Rhyme*, was re-issued in Japan and Korea in 2008, and in the U. K. in 2010. His first new album since 1972, *Welcome Up: Songs of Space and Time*, was released on Old Bear Records and Light in the Attic Records in 2020.